

WHO talks with China on sending bird flu team (Update)

April 8 2013, by Gillian Wong



A photographer takes a photo of a joint press conference by Chinese health officials and World Health Organization representatives, from left, Deng Haihua, spokesman for China's Commission of Health and Family Planning, Feng Zhijian, head of the emergency office of China's Disease Control and Prevention Center or CDC, Liang Wannian head of a Chinese government office in charge of H7N9 bird flu prevention control, Michael O'Leary, head of the WHO's office in China, and Sirenda Vong, the WHO's Emerging Infectious Diseases expert, in Beijing, China, Monday, April 8, 2013. The World Health Organization is talking with the Chinese government about sending international experts to China to help investigate a new bird flu strain that has killed six. Most of the 21 people stricken so far got severely ill. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

The World Health Organization is talking with the Chinese government about sending international experts to China to help investigate a new bird flu strain that has sickened at least 24 people, killing seven of them.

A 64-year-old retired man in Shanghai became the latest victim of the H7N9 bird flu virus that had previously not been known to infect humans, the city government said Monday.

The Shanghai government said the man died Sunday night, a week after first experiencing chills. He sought medical treatment last Wednesday for pneumonia-like conditions. By Sunday morning, his condition worsened, he was out of breath and was admitted to a ward for in-patient treatment. He died hours later.

Michael O'Leary, head of WHO's office in China, told reporters in Beijing on Monday that the international health organization had confidence in China's efforts to track and control the outbreak of H7N9 infections, but that growing interest in the virus globally has prompted WHO to consider sending a team.

The cases are of "great interest not only in the scientific community but in the world at large," O'Leary said at a joint press conference with China's national health agency. "WHO's responsibility in part is to make sure that we serve as liaison and linkage between China and the rest of the world."

The team would likely include epidemiological, laboratory and communications experts, but the matter was still being discussed by the two sides and it remained unclear if and when such a group would arrive, O'Leary said.



Liang Wannian, head of a Chinese government office in charge of H7N9 bird flu prevention control, left, and Michael O'Leary, head of the World Health Organization's office in China, attend a joint press conference in Beijing, China, Monday, April 8, 2013. The World Health Organization is talking with the Chinese government about sending international experts to China to help investigate a new bird flu strain that has killed six. Most of the 21 people stricken so far got severely ill. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

Aside from the latest fatality in Shanghai, China reported two more cases of human infection of the H7N9 bird flu virus on Monday, raising the total number of cases to 24—all in the eastern part of the country. Most of the patients have become severely ill, and seven of them have died, however milder infections may be going undetected.

There could be additional infections, both among animals and humans, in other regions and authorities have stepped up measures to monitor

cases of pneumonia with unexplained causes, said Liang Wannian, director of the Chinese health agency's H7N9 flu prevention and control office.

Liang said Chinese experts also were in the early stages of researching a possible vaccine for the virus, though it might not be needed if the virus remains only sporadically reported and if it does not spread easily among people.

The H7N9 strain previously was known only to infect birds, and officials say they do not know why the virus is infecting humans now. The virus has been detected in live poultry in several food markets where human cases have been found, leading officials to think people are most likely contracting the virus through direct contact with infected fowl.

Authorities have halted live poultry trade in cities where cases have been reported, and slaughtered fowl in markets where the virus has been detected.



Chinese health workers, wearing masks, walk past a group of security guards blocking a petitioner outside China's Health Ministry where a joint press conference between Chinese health officials and World Health Organization representatives was held in Beijing, China, Monday, April 8, 2013. The World Health Organization is talking with the Chinese government about sending international experts to China to help investigate a new bird flu strain that has killed six. Most of the 21 people stricken so far got severely ill. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

Further investigations are underway and, for now, there's no evidence the virus is spreading easily between people. However, scientists are watching closely to see if the flu poses a substantial risk to public health or could potentially spark a global pandemic.

In 2003, China allowed WHO to send a five-member team to help investigate an outbreak of the fatal flu-like illness, SARS, after its own experts could not trace the source of the disease.

China's response at the time was slow. The government stayed silent for months after the first cases of an unidentified disease were reported, a cover-up that contributed to the spread of the virus to many parts of China and to two dozen other countries, killing hundreds of people.

International observers say that over the past decade, China's public health agencies have become increasingly forthcoming with information.

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